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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN POET ON TRIAL FOR BLASPHEMY

REF: A. A) 07AMMAN 2255 AND PREVIOUS
1B. B) 07AMMAN 4325 AND PREVIOUS

1. (SBU) Charges against a Jordanian poet, Islam Samhan, for allegedly defaming and insulting religion through Quranic verses and prophets in his book of poetry, "Grace Like a Shadow," has pitted religious leaders against public calls for greater freedom of expression. Eight months after the book's publication in February, Jordan's Grand Mufti, Noah Alqdah Samas, issued a fatwa stating it was blasphemous. Two weeks later, on October 19, Samhan was arrested after the Press and Publication Department (PPD) referred his book to the Court of First Instance for violating the Press and Publications Law. On October 23, Samhan was released on USD 1,400 bail (1,000 Jordanian dinars) but still faces a punishment of up to three years in jail and/or USD 28,000 fine (20,000 JD). The public, media, and human rights groups are using the case as an example of declining freedoms of expression in Jordan.

2. (SBU) Samas is charged with violating two articles of the Press and Publications Law (ref a); 1) Article 35, which stipulates that advance approval of media is required prior to publications, and 2) Article 38, which prohibits publication of media that slanders or insults religion. Based on press accounts, Samhan insists his book was pre-approved, adding that the Ministry of Culture even ordered 50 books. Regarding Article 38, Samhan and his supporters claim that his poetry is not offensive and that most writers are inspired by the language of the Quran and, therefore, use Quranic terminology. Passages criticized by detractors include a comparison of Samhan's loneliness to that of prophet Yusuf's and an address by his beloved to God while lying beneath a see-through sheet.

Groups Speaking Out for Samhan and Freedom of Expression

3. (SBU) Samhan's case has spurred calls for greater freedom of expression. A Facebook group, currently totaling 224 members, was created on October 21 to urge the King to release Samhan and to curb all forms of repression against artists and innovators. The Facebook page asserts that there is an increase in the number of writers and artists being taken to court but do not cite figures to support this assertion. (Note: The Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ) told Poloff on October 21 that 56 journalists are currently involved in court cases for libel, slander, and defamation (ref b). End Note) The 655-member Jordanian Writers Association accused the PDD of systematically banning and confiscating books. Regional and local human rights groups, including the CDFJ and Cairo-based Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, have also come out with statements against Samhan's imprisonment while criticizing the lack of media freedom and freedom of expression.

Religious Establishment Forces Action Against Samhan

4. (SBU) Comment: Samhan's case displays the might of

Jordan's religious establishment in society and with the government. While the first attack on Samhan's poetry came from an article on popular news website ammonnews.net in September, a fatwa issued by Grand Mufti Samas in early October was the driving force behind Samhan's arrest. The fatwa labeled the poet an "infidel," "apostate," and described the use of Quranic verses as an act of blasphemy. Other religious conservatives, including the Muslim Brotherhood, quickly added their criticism - increasing the pressure for action to be taken. Despite the growing support for Samhan and calls for greater freedom of expression, reformist voices remain marginal when compared to those of the religious establishment.

Beecroft